

THE GREAT REFUSAL

Do you remember the verses in the Passion Gospel that Gloria read on Sunday? It seems like a detail and easy to overlook, but it is one of the most important parts of the story. It underlines the whole theme of the crucifixion drama: They told how it happened, that as that grim procession came to the place of execution, Jesus was offered wine mixed with gall and, after tasting, he refused to drink it.

A benevolent custom of the Jerusalem Jews was to offer the condemned person a cup of wine mixed with a mild narcotic, a kind way of mitigating the suffering. Jesus was offered this comforting cup. Recognizing the compassionate custom, Jesus tasted it. He honored its kind intention, and registered his appreciation. But having tasted it, he would not drink. It was the one cup he would not accept. How are we to understand that great refusal? To answer that question brings us to the very heart of things.

I think about how that numbing anesthetic would have blunted and marred the crowning service of Jesus' life; and the cross was the crowning service of his life. And he deliberately chose that to be remembered by. It gathered into one splendid action all of the teaching, all the healing, all of his redeeming labors of his life. All he had come to do -- all he had lived for, all that God wanted of him-- was gathered into that last act of service: the cross. Jesus understood that facing the ultimate hour of his commitment, when tremendous demands were going to be imposed, when all the resources of mind and body will be put to the test, it would not do to have his senses dulled or his mind confused. He wanted to be at his clearest and best when faced with his final most important hours of his entire life. He was offered the drink that would blunt the pain and dull the senses, and after tasting it, he handed back the cup, undrunk.

In the same way, I imagine how differently we might think of Jesus' death on the cross, if he had taken that slightly easier way. By refusing it, Jesus made it clear that he went to his cross by his own free will. "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord." Under the influence of a drug, his will would not be entirely his own. We know that under those kinds of influences we are not controlled from inside ourselves, but by compulsions outside of ourselves. In the grip of those attractive and seductive substances we have surrendered our personality to others. And that was one thing Jesus could not do. The infinite meaning of the death of Jesus lay in its being a voluntary sacrifice, in obedience to the will of God. In the perfect freedom of his all-encompassing love and according to his own determination, he was ready to lay down his life. So he took the cup, tasted it, then quite deliberately, refused to drink it.

We wonder, too, if in that great refusal he was not thinking about us, his people. In spite of all the advances in science and technology, in spite all of the many ways in which life has become easier for us, suffering is still terribly real for many. When he refused the drink that would lessen his own suffering, he was resolving to be our brother, down to the very depths of human suffering, whoever the sufferer may be, whenever, wherever? It would be so like him.

In those moments before he was raised up on the cross, Jesus was offered the merciful drink. Had he thought that his work was done, that no more could be accomplished, he might have taken it. But he knew that all he had come to do, all that God expected of him, would need to be fulfilled in the dark hours that still lay ahead. If he had not been entirely in command of his mind, we might never have heard the gracious prayer for pardon: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We would never have understood his human affection for his human

mother. We might never have shared the moment when, ignoring his own suffering, he comforted the thief at his side. We might never have remembered how even in the midst of his own agony he thought first of others. Only when those terrible hours --those glorious hours -- had passed, only then was it possible for him at last to say, "It is finished." It is finished.

All of this glory, all of this redeeming truth, we would have missed if it were not for the fact that when Jesus was offered the cup that would ease his suffering, he graciously accepted it, but then, quite deliberately, refused to drink it.